

## **Sports history: reflections on my journey so far**

Skillen, Fiona

*Published in:*  
The International Journal of the History of Sport

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/09523367.2017.1383393](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1383393)

*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Skillen, F 2017, 'Sports history: reflections on my journey so far', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 34, no. 5-6, pp. 437-441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1383393>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please view our takedown policy at <https://edshare.gcu.ac.uk/id/eprint/5179> for details of how to contact us.

## **Sports History: Reflections on my journey so far**

I am currently a lecturer in Sport and Event Management and Chair of the British Society of Sport History: my journey into sports history was a complex one. My initial plan after my undergraduate degree was to do teacher training to become a history teacher. However in my final term one of my lecturers suggested I might consider applying for an ESRC 1+3 Studentship which would allow me to complete a Masters and a PhD. So the search was on to find a suitable topic; one which would hold my interest for the next four years, and perhaps even more importantly one which would appeal to the funders as this application was to be submitted to a nationwide competition.

After a childhood of watching old films with my maternal grandmother, Nana, I had become and remain passionate about (some might say slightly obsessed) 1930s and 1940s film, 'women's pictures' starring people like Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn and Joan Crawford to be more precise. Initially my plan had been to draw on this hobby and research depictions of women in the films of the interwar period. However after a quick scan of the literature it became apparent that I was not the first person to have thought of this idea, in fact many, many people had published and analyzed these films from all different perspectives. Feeling downhearted and at a loss about what else I could study a chance conversation with my Dad about his recent round of golf sparked off a tiny idea. Why had not I thought of it before?

From when I was old enough to walk my Dad had encouraged me to play golf. Everyone in my family plays or has played at one time or another and our local club was a focal point of our social lives. From the age of ten I too had become a member; incidentally the only girl junior at our club. I played golf regularly and became only too aware of the challenges faced by female players within a local club setting. What must it have been like for women 'breaking' into this game a hundred years before in even less 'enlightened' times? Research into the existing historiography highlighted the lack of work on the history of women's sport in Britain, in particular there were few detailed histories of specific sports or any sense of developments across time with only a few notable exceptions such as Jenny Hargreaves' work. I decided to focus on the interwar years as it was a period that has always interested me and I believed it had the potential to offer some important insights into the growth of women's sport. A few months later I heard that I had been successful and that I had been awarded fund to undertake a Masters and PhD in the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Glasgow.

Whilst the research idea was good putting it into practice was tough. There were no archives for women's sports organizations when I started my research, something which I am glad to say is now slowly changing. The few records which did exist were often kept in boxes and bags in office cupboards and lofts; little if any were catalogued or ordered in any logical way. It became apparent that the archives which did exist were fragmentary and generally provided an overview of particular matches or events: useful up to a point but more was needed in order to provide a detailed understanding of women's experiences of sport in this early period. And so it was that I began to take tentative steps into the world

of oral history. The material I collected through this process proved invaluable and I will always be grateful to my interviewees for their patience and eloquence. During my PhD I presented at conferences, wrote journal articles, undertook teaching, joined committees and helped to organize conferences and events. In short I worked hard to develop a strong cv and range of experiences.

I completed my PhD in June 2008, nine months after my funding had finished but within the twelve month window permitted. Throughout my PhD I had tutored in my department and when funding finished I was lucky enough to secure more teaching work. I say lucky but as many will know who have been in this position it is incredibly challenging to balance the demands of the PhD against the amount of teaching required to fund your material needs, while at the same time trying write seminars and lectures, undertake marking, completing the lengthy job applications required for academic jobs. After four months of teaching upwards of ten seminars a week and occasional lectures across several programmes I secured an interview, not for a job in academia as I had hoped, but rather for a part-time short-term history research post in a museum in a remote village in southern Scotland. So remote in fact it was a two-hour journey, timed perfectly in order for me to catch the *only* daily bus to the village. Due to the inaccessibility of the village I worked alternately one week on site, staying over night in the local youth hostel (and taking all my food with me as there was no local shop or restaurant), and one week from home. The job was not anything to do with sports history but it was interesting, it allowed me to pay my rent for a year and gave me an opportunity to explore the possibilities of work outside the academy. During my time working on this project I submit my PhD, passed my Viva, got married and applied for numerous academic and non-academic posts.

Two months after I completed my contract I secured another temporary part-time voluntary post working for a women's organization helping to organize a re-enactment of a women's suffrage march in Edinburgh to mark 100 years since the original event. Again with this post it was another change of sector and a change of gear requiring me to draw on a different set of skills but still underpinned by my love of history. This six-month post culminated in a march of 5000 women through the streets of Edinburgh. During my time working on this event I was writing journal articles based on my PhD research and applying for a wide range of jobs in a variety of sectors including academia. Finally almost six months after I finished my contract I was offered a three-year Post Doctoral Research post in the International Football Institute at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in Preston. As with my museum post this job meant living away from home for periods of time as UCLan was a 6 hour round trip from my flat. This post allowed me time to work on converting my PhD research into a monograph while at the same time researching and developing new work and funding bids with my colleague and mentor Professor John Hughson. Being back in academia confirmed for me that this was what I wanted to do and I started, with guidance from John and my other UCLan colleague Professor Wray Vamplew, to think more strategically about what to publish and where. As with any short-term post there is only so long you can enjoy the feeling of having a job before the thought of what will happen next begins to creep up on you; and so as I neared the end of my contract I began applying for lectureships and research posts again. I was lucky enough to get an interview and subsequent offer for a

one-year maternity cover post in Sport and Events Management at Glasgow Caledonian University. I say lucky as the job was in Glasgow, my home city, and I had been applying for posts all over the UK, despite my husband and family being based in Central Scotland. That first year was incredibly tough, teaching and writing modules whilst trying to keep up with writing articles, attending conferences and editing my book. However it was worth it all when my one-year post became a permanent lectureship.

I had to work hard to secure each of these posts and at no time was it certain I would ultimately secure a permanent post in academia. I knew only too well as I went through the process how difficult it could be so I made a decision when I completed my PhD that I would give myself five years to try and get a foothold in academia, something which I could only do with the moral and financial support of my partner. I had no strategic plan (I am not sure that you can have one in the current UK job market), but with guidance from my colleagues, former supervisor, luck and a lot of hard work I managed, to secure a post just within my timeframe.

I think it is hard to underestimate the physical and mental strain being a post-doc can. You are often competing against friends for posts, trying to make your work 'fit' the job descriptions as explicitly as you can – there can be a feeling that sports history is not always viewed as 'proper' research when of course it is but that fact, or rather the impacts of your work sometimes needs laboring. The constant focus on 'what next' inculcated by short-term contracts is exhausting and leaves you with no sense of security or ability to plan your future, personal or professional, in any meaningful way. For example try getting a mortgage on a short-term, part-time academic contract! All of these factors, combined with the huge demands of any post you are fortunate enough to secure can leave you mentally and physically exhausted.

I am still in my post at Glasgow Caledonian University three years on. I love the teaching aspects of my job and I have some great colleagues, however I rarely teach sports history and increasingly my research is being pulled away from this field too. However, I know from experience and talking to friends at other UK universities that even in permanent posts there are still huge uncertainties; redundancies, cuts to courses and staffing, pressure to achieve high student satisfaction scores and to secure large research grants even though such funding is continually dwindling.

One constant throughout all of this has been my connection to the British Society of Sports History (BSSH). I attended my first conference in 2005 where I was immediately made to feel at home by the members. After a couple of years I suggested that the Society should be doing more for postgraduates or at the very least that they should have some representation on the BSSH executive. I was encouraged by our then Chair Dr Martin Johnes to stand for election to the executive and at the following AGM I was appointed as the first Postgraduate Representative. Over the last ten or so years on the Executive, (three as Postgraduate Representative, one as conference convener, three as Vice-Chair, three as Chair), I have seen significant changes within the Society.

I was keen to establish a profile for postgraduates within BSSH, something which was encouraged by those on the Executive at the time. It was hoped that by having a postgraduate representative on the Executive more postgrads would be encouraged to join the society and attend the annual conference. Moreover the society itself was keen to start to address the concerns and issues facing postgraduates within our discipline. Over the last ten years our postgraduate membership numbers have risen and the numbers of postgraduates attending our annual conference has also increased year on year. We have recognised the importance of the next generation of sports historians and have been working on several projects to engage younger people and new researchers. To this end we have established a number of funds and prizes for school children, PhD students and post-doctoral researchers. Feedback from our membership has highlighted the concern that sports history is sidelined by 'mainstream' history, in an effort to address this we have sponsored panels at large history conferences and provided funding through our small grants scheme to a range of events some of which have been interdisciplinary. We have also tried to include sessions within our annual conference to reflect changes in academia; sessions on areas such as social media, funding and publishing. We have established, through our first regional coordinator Dr Dion Georgiou, regional networks to widen our impact and to encourage people from a range of backgrounds and sectors to become active within the Society. It is the role of the society to support and promote the interests and needs of our members both in academia and those outside it in whatever way we can and I believe we have made important strides in this in recent years.

Another significant change during my time on the BSSH Executive has been the growth of research in women's sports history and its representation within the society. Since 2010 the number of people researching women's sports history in the UK has increased and year on year we receive an increasing number of abstracts for our annual conference on topics relating to this area. This can be in no small part due to the promotion of women's sports history by BSSH. As highlighted in my article with Dr Carol Osborne in *Women's History Review*,<sup>1</sup> BSSH has continually promoted work in the area of women's sports history since 2010, examples include: a special edition on the topic of 'Women in Sports History' of its journal *Sport in History*<sup>2</sup> in 2010; it sponsored a symposium on Gender and Sports History at UCLan in 10 June 2011; it has invited female scholars Jennifer Hargreaves (2011), Claire Langhamer (2013) and Patricia Vertinsky (2014) to deliver the Sir Derek Birley Memorial Lecture as scholars dedicated to researching women's experiences of sport and sport as leisure. Finally it has elected female members to key decision-making positions on the Executive Committee, including election of the first female Chair to the Society's

---

<sup>1</sup> Carol A. Osborne & Fiona Skillen (2015) Forum: Women in Sport, *Women's History Review*, 24:5, 655-661.

<sup>2</sup> 'Women in Sport History', Carol A. Osborne & Fiona Skillen (Eds) (2010) *Sport in History*.

Executive Committee, Dr Carol Osborne, 2011–14.

Concurrent with these developments our membership demographic has also shifted in this period. We have seen an increase in the number of women members. We have increased our female membership levels from just over five percent to almost twenty percent in the last ten years. I hope that the increased visibility of women within the society, both at Executive level and at conferences has played a part in this.

From a personal perspective BSSH provided me with an important lifeline in those years after my PhD. The regional meetings, annual conferences and executive meetings allowed me to keep in touch with what was happening in our field. Watching papers and talking to fellow members motivated me to keep up with my research and writing.

I am sure the path to my current post has been unique, however I am certain that my experiences are not. I know from talking to colleagues at a similar stage in their careers that they too had periods of unemployment, periods of juggling several concurrent part-time jobs and years of uncertainty. I do not believe that this is unique to sports history but true across different disciplines, particularly in arts and humanities in the UK. I wish I could say that those difficult times are behind us and that the next generation coming up will have an easier journey but I fear that it will be just as tough, if not tougher as pressure mounts on the UK's Higher Education system.

On a positive note however I have seen tremendous change during my time in BSSH. Its promotion of new scholars and those working outside the academy is beginning to bear fruit as our membership grows and new projects develop. The society has also promoted women in sports history in a way that it never has before. Perhaps because of this, arguably women in sports history has been one of, if not, the single biggest growth area in the discipline within the UK in recent years. I am proud to have been, alongside Dr Carol Osborne, an instigator of BSSH's role in promoting and developing women's sports history.

Dr Fiona Skillen

Glasgow Caledonian University

Fiona.skillen@gcu.ac.uk